11/06/11
Holy Waste
John 12:1-8
Charleston

This incident makes me uncomfortable. I don't know about you, but in my upbringing, public displays of emotion were frowned upon: "There is a time and place for everything. Keep your emotions to yourself; don't get carried away." "Whatever you do, don't declare your love publicly and carve your initials and the initials of your beloved into a tree." The fetching high school sophomore I had my eye on and who I walked over the bridge carrying her books after school to the busy down-town corner where she caught a city bus – one day, overwhelmed with passion, I assume, took out her lipstick and stunned me by writing on the white brick wall of Sitnek's Drugstore – "S.K. & J.B." inside a bright red heart. Of course it was the bus stop where my father also waited on his way home from work. He took a very dim view of the whole affair. Among the things he told me were: "Fools names and fools faces always appear in public places." Public displays of affection were particularly frowned on. Our religion was Presbyterian, which meant that it was unemotional, controlled, reasonable, and certainly not spontaneous. The Methodist side of the family was a little suspect frankly, because they were so demonstrative and enthusiastic and got themselves all worked up in worship. Other people might shout and weep and stand up and wave their hands around and sing fervently, but we Presbyterians preferred our religion sitting down with a bulletin in our hands to tell us how to express ourselves. "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" was about as enthusiastic as it ever got. And no displays of affection except in the privacy of your home, and then only with a very select few – mother, father, sisters, brothers – although brother was pushing it. Men don't say "I love you" to each other and certainly don't throw their arms around one another unless it's your father or brother. My father and I loved each other – but we never said "I love you."

So this makes me uncomfortable—this gesture of very public and very extravagant and irrational emotion: Mary pouring a lot of expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, in public, right out there where God and everybody else could see. It wasn't reasonable. It was such a waste!

The title of this sermon, "Holy Waste," has nothing to do with the Chicago Cubs. Perhaps not everyone understands. It has been a very long time

since the Chicago Cubs have rewarded their millions of passionate fans with a National League championship – not to mention a World Series. I have loved baseball since it entered my life when I was ten years old. Over the years I have listened on the radio, watched on television, visited and watched games in ten or so major league parks, played at it, read about it fairly extensively. It has been an altogether satisfying avocation, punctuated with occasional periods of frustration and sadness and great joy and happiness. Over the years I have given my heart to

The Pittsburgh Pirates, from the age of ten: my first true love;
Briefly, the Cleveland Indians;
The Philadelphia Phillies in 1950, when they won the National League pennant with a collection of young players known affectionately as the "Whiz Kids";
The Cincinnati Reds, when we lived in Ohio;
The Chicago White Sox in 1959, when we first came to Chicago and the Sox won the pennant that very night; and
Since 1985, the Chicago Cubs, the North Side team in Chicago where Fourth Presbyterian Church is located and I live. I have in the intervening years attended something like 300 games at Wrigley Field.

Every team on that list has won a World Series championship in my lifetime, except one. I really thought the Cubs would do it before I retired. After all, every other team to whom I gave my heart got around to it. I confess that I harbored that hope earlier this year. Maybe everything would come together, there would be no injuries, every player would have his best year ever, maybe a miracle would happen, and I would sit in my seat in October and watch a World Series in Wrigley Field. It didn't happen. The Cubs lost more than ninety games, which isn't even respectable. It hasn't happened in 103 years. There have been sixteen U.S. Presidents since it happened last, eleven amendments to the Constitution, Haley's comet passed twice, five states have been added to the Union, generations have been born and passed away like "a dream dies at the opening day" as Isaac Watts put it in "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past", and no world championship.

This is not about being reasonable. If it were about being rational and reasonable, everybody would be a New York Yankees fan. This is about something more primal and powerful than reason. This is about deep love of the heart, passion, extravagance, waste, if you will.

The incident occurs at the epicenter of the Gospel of John. It is the day before Jesus will ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and set off a riotous public demonstration that will precipitate his arrest. Actually his fate has already been sealed. When word reaches the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem that he has raised up a dead man and many people are now following him, the authorities, ever wary of upsetting the Roman occupation forces, decide that it will be best for everyone if they can find a way to get rid of him. “Better for one man to die than the whole nation to be destroyed,” Caiaphas, the chief priest says, an unpleasant but understandable executive decision. In fact, they have issued an order that if anyone sees Jesus, they are to report it immediately so he can be arrested before he causes any more trouble.

So that is the context. Jesus’ dear friends, Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus, who was given his life back, have arranged a dinner party in their home at Bethany just two miles outside Jerusalem. Jesus is a wanted man, under a death sentence. So there is a very real element of danger surrounding this encounter.

Guests at a dinner party recline around a low table or a cloth spread on the dirt floor. They dip chunks of bread into a bowl of oil. They eat olives and pomegranates and, if it is a festive occasion, maybe some lamb, and they drink wine from cups if the host is affluent or, if not, from a common cup. A servant keeps the bread coming and the bowl of oil and the wine goblets filled, stepping over the extended feet of the guests. At this dinner, as usual, Martha is doing the serving—Martha who, just a few days before, was scolding Jesus for showing up too late, after her brother had died, but who also was the first person to put into words the feelings of her heart, our first creed: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Have you noticed how women in these 2,000-year-old stories, particularly in John, are assertive, opinionated, and smart and insist on being taken seriously at a time and in a culture when that was not the norm? Jesus is there. So are Lazarus, Mary, and some of Jesus’ disciples and friends. There is pleasant small talk about the weather and the wine, laughter, conviviality—probably to avoid the impending disaster everyone knows is ahead. And in the midst of it, without warning, Mary gets up, walks to where Jesus is reclining, pours a jar of very expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and then, of all things, loosens her hair, and dries his feet.

There's a lot going on here. It was a lot of perfume, so much that the aroma of it filled the room—expensive perfume, maybe Mary's lifetime supply. It came from India. You used it sparingly, carefully, to anoint the dead body of a loved one, to sprinkle a few drops on yourself for a special romantic occasion. You did not pour it all out – waste it all at once. And, of course, there was the intimacy of the gesture, the feet, the loosened hair. Some interpreters can't resist suggesting romantic implications. Was she really anointing his body for death? Was she overwhelmed with gratitude that her brother was alive and they were together again? Whatever else it was, it was an act of extravagance, a very public act of deep love and devotion.

"What a waste. What a foolish waste," someone says out loud. It's Judas. He's the treasurer, holds the purse, accepts contributions, pays the bills, and, John explains, skims a little off the top for himself. Judas's question, however, is not unreasonable: good trustees ask the same question. "Why wasn't the perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" He's the bookkeeper. The perfume could have been sold for 300 denarri. One denarri is a day's wage. Three hundred is a year's income. That's a lot of money; it could do a lot of good. After all, institutions hire consultants to help them know the highest and best use of assets, to achieve long-term goals. Giving it all away for love, pouring out a valuable asset on someone's feet, isn't ordinarily among the recommendations.

Jesus comes to her defense. "She's been keeping the perfume for my burial, which could happen any day now. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." Opponents of government programs to help poor people like to quote Jesus to justify not passing legislation that might actually help poor people. So it's worth pausing to observe that he was quoting the law, a phrase everyone knew, from the book of Deuteronomy, which actually urges generosity to the poor. This is what it says: "Give liberally and be ungrudging. . . . Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor" (15:10). So to cite "the poor you always have with you" as a reason not to extend help is a distortion and certainly not what Jesus meant—Jesus who, after all, spent his whole life among mostly poor people and who had a whole lot more to say about poverty and economic justice than he said about sex, about which he said virtually nothing.

It is, however, a reasonable question: Why not use the valuable asset to do some good? Why waste it? The question deserves thoughtful attention.

When times are tough, is it appropriate to fill the church with poinsettias at Christmas and lilies on Easter, wonders Fred Craddock, which you will do here at First Scots because you were placing orders this morning and we will certainly do it at Fourth Presbyterian Church.  Poinsettias – and plenty of them.  When the homeless poor are lined up at the door, is it right to fix the pipe organ? The answer is not simple, as Jesus tried to teach Judas. Sometimes, apparently, there is nothing more important than the impulse to act extravagantly and beautifully out of a heart full of love.

John Shelby Spong, a retired Episcopal bishop, who is in the news a lot for challenging his church's orthodoxy and traditional morality, wrote an article for the *Christian Century* that I have never forgotten. He was the Bishop of Newark at a time when the city was in dreadful shape. He wrote, "Urban life is not beautiful. Garbage collections are generally poor. Trash litters the streets. Many city people are so depressed that they deliberately fill their lives with ugliness, as a commentary on the way they feel valued by others. Consequently, money spent to beautify urban houses of worship is not wasted—urban churches need to shine as symbols of hope, as signs of the kingdom."

Mary poured out her heart, her deep love and hope. She put herself at great risk by so publically identifying herself with Jesus, and she risked the immediate ridicule and disdain of the rational and reasonable men around her, one of whom, in fact, tried to call her out.

One of the very best treatments of this incident is in an unlikely source: a little book of essays and sermons by the late Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. Born in Germany, he was a professor of philosophy at several leading German universities, a refugee from Hitler, a professor at Union Seminary in New York City, Harvard, and finally, late in his life, the University of Chicago. He was a Lutheran minister and a theologian, but everyone—Christian or non-Christian, believer or atheist—was interested in his thought. His thought was, to say the very least, dense, difficult. I met him once when I was in my final year of divinity school. He has just come to Chicago, and everyone wanted to hear the great man. His lectures on the history of Western civilization were delivered to a standing-room audience in the university's largest hall. I attended then and didn't understand a word he said. But sometimes Paul Tillich could be simple and crystal clear.

About Mary he said, “She has performed an act of holy waste growing out of the abundance of her heart. Judas,” Tillich observed, “has his emotional life under control. . . . Jesus (alone) knows that without the abundance of heart nothing great can happen. . . . He knows that calculating love is not love at all.”

“The history of humankind,” Tillich continues, “is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear to waste themselves in the service of a new creation. They wasted out of the fullness of their hearts.”

Surely Tillich was thinking of those imprudent and passionate souls, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke out against the policies of the German government under Hitler and paid dearly for it, those brave enough to risk life itself and who often lost their lives, as Bonhoeffer did, because their hearts were so full of love for their nation, for truth and justice, that they would not allow themselves to be reasonable and prudent and silent.

What’s at stake here? “People are sick,” Paul Tillich said, “not only because they have not received love but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves.”

As I was pondering all that, I happened on a television show we occasionally watch and love every time, on PBS: *Doc Martin.* It’s about a physician in a small village on the southwestern tip of England. He’s wonderfully eccentric, not very attractive, a kind and good man and doctor, but incredibly awkward socially, consistently bumbling and fumbling personal relationships. In the episode we watched, he and the local school principal, Louisa, have shared a hazardous medical adventure involving a young boy. Doc Martin has essentially saved his life. He and Louisa are clearly attracted to each other. Both are single and lonely. In the back of a taxi on the way home from the hospital, their hands touch and Louisa literally throws herself at Doc Martin, kissing him passionately. As they break off the kiss, which he is apparently enjoying very much, and look lovingly and passionately into each other’s eyes, he says, “I’m assuming you have a regular dental hygiene routine.”

“Well, obviously not in the last few hours,” she says, “but thank you very much, yes, I have.”

He persists: “Well that would suggest rhinositis or gastroesophageal reflux.”

“Are you saying I have bad breath?”

“I just think it would be wise to rule out any infection of the aerodigestive tract. Obviously a dietary explanation would be the happiest outcome.”

The episode ends with the taxi stopping in the middle of the road, the door opening, and Doc Martin unceremoniously kicked out of the taxi, walking the rest of the way home alone.

The great theologian said, “Do not suppress in yourself the impulse to do what the woman at Bethany did. Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender, the Spirit who trespasses all reason. Do not greedily preserve your time and your strength for what is useful and reasonable. Keep yourself open for the creative moment which may appear in the midst of what seemed to be waste” (“Holy Waste,” *The New Being*, pp. 48–49).

How sad to live your whole life and never have loved so deeply that you did something so foolish, so extravagant, that it makes you blush to think of it. How sad to have lived your whole life without ever throwing caution to the wind and doing something wonderfully outrageous. How sad never to have loved so much that you would have given everything—your life itself—for the sake of it.

Frederick Buechner writes that if the church is ever destroyed, it will not be “from without by a world that sees it as a dead-end street but by people like you and me who destroy it from within by our deadness and staleness, our failure to be brave, to be human, to take chances” (“Dereliction,” *A Room Called Remember,* p. 125).

“Without the abundance and heart, nothing great can happen,” the dignified old German philosopher wrote. “Do not suppress in yourselves the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender. . . . Keep yourself open for the creative moment. Do not suppress the impulse to do what Mary did at Bethany. You will be reproached as she was. But Jesus was on her side and he is also on yours.” (Tillich, “Holy Waste,” *The New Being,* pp.46–49).

I wonder what it was like for Jesus, don't you?  He had alternatives. He knew about the charges that had been leveled at him: that he was a rabble-rouser, that he disrespected the conventions and violated the traditional morality of religion, that he was a disturber of the peace, that he was a threat to Pax Romana. He knew that people were calling him Messiah, Lord, King. He knew it could cost him his life. It would have been altogether reasonable, prudent, and so understandable had he turned around and headed home, back to Galilee, out of harm's way.  It would have been altogether reasonable had he withdrawn from view for a while, resumed his teaching in the synagogues, practiced a little carpentry, maybe married, had a family, and lived to a ripe old age. There were plenty of people who advised him to do just that.

Instead, he visited his friends, allowed Mary her act of extravagant love, and then got up the very next morning and rode into Jerusalem, to his death.

What a waste. What an amazing, magnificent, holy waste.

Amen.